Save My Game

Character Death

By Jason Nelson-Brown

This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

PC Death and Resurrection

The topic for this installment of *Save My Game* is character death and what can be done to prevent or correct it. The prospect of death adds the spice of risk to a campaign, and players should never think their characters are invulnerable. But excessive character death can disrupt a party, derail an adventure, and cause frustration and discontent among players. What's a DM to do?

Problem: Should PCs Go on Forever?

Every DM has to consider how to handle PC deaths and related issues. Is it acceptable to kill off PCs at all? Or should you offer them a way out of any situation? And if you do kill them, how easy should it be to bring them back? -- Bart

Death is a part of life, right? If you're a **D&D** character, that old saw is almost certainly true! But character death complicates the game for you as DM, so it pays to think ahead about how rubbing out a PC will affect your campaign.

Whether or not to kill characters is a serious issue in any campaign. If you kill too many, players get frustrated about losing the characters in which they've invested so much time and energy, and they may drift away from the game. But if you coddle them too much, players may get cocky and begin to think their characters are indestructible -- an attitude that often leads to poor play. So a DM has to think about how easy avoiding death or resurrecting a dead PC should be in his campaign.

Solution 1: Stayin' Alive -- The Fudge Factor

The easiest way to avoid having to deal with character death is just not to kill the PCs. You can accomplish this goal in any of several ways. For example, you could drop hints about actions the PCs might take at certain points that would enhance their chances for survival. Or if you remember an important character ability that a player seems to have forgotten, remind her about it. And if the PCs attempt an action that will almost certainly bring disaster down on their heads, you can suggest that they might want to rethink that choice.

If such techniques seem too heavy-handed to you, try working behind the scenes (and behind the screen) instead. For instance, if it looks as though the PCs are about to get crushed in an encounter, lay off a little. One way to take it easy on a party is by fudging die rolls -- for example, when a monster gets a critical threat that you

know the target PC won't survive, pretend that the threat never happened. In like manner, you could announce that a monster failed its save when it really succeeded, or make a save DC a little easier than it's supposed to be so a PC doesn't fail. This technique is worth considering when a PC might otherwise get toasted through pure chance by some hazard she could not reasonably have expected or avoided. Try to be subtle about it, though. Spread the monster attacks out a bit so that all the PCs take some damage, rather than focusing them on one PC for a kill.

Though this technique is a valuable part of any DM's arsenal, you shouldn't make a habit of fudging die rolls, because players will get bored and cocky if they think you'll always go easy on them. Once they realize you've fudged in their favor, any sense of any real danger to their characters goes out the window, and part of the fun is gone.

Solution 2: Pointing the Way toward Survival

A more elegant way to enhance a party's chances for survival is to place control of the fudging in the hands of the players. Some sort of "luck point" system, such as the action points used in *Unearthed Arcana* and the ***Eberron*** *Campaign Setting,* can be a good vehicle for enhancing player control. Such a system gives PCs a second chance when an encounter goes sour and often lets them make it through a tough situation unscathed. However, the technique does have its limitations, so players can't expect to rely on it all the time to save their characters. But sometimes, when the margin between life and death is very thin, a bit of extra help can be just enough.

If you wish, you can even expand a luck point system beyond what your game offers. For example, you might consider allowing a PC to spend several points at once to achieve an automatic success. Such an adjustment might be necessary if, for example, an enemy with a greataxe decides to do a coup de grace on a sleeping PC. The Fortitude save DC to survive such an attack could get very high indeed! Is such a model realistic? Sure, but it's also a very unsatisfying way to die.

Using this kind of system somewhat devalues abilities such as the Luck domain granted power and the psionic powers *second chance* and *fate of one,* which allow additional chances to succeed on various die rolls. Thus, you might consider enhancing those effects in some way, or even tying them into whatever luck point system you use.

Solution 3: Rise and Shine

Even if you make every effort to ensure character survival, one or more PCs in your campaign will probably end up dead at some point. Should you let them come back? Some DMs don't like the concept of raising the dead at all -- they prefer a more gritty campaign in which death is indeed the end. If you share that philosophy, be extra careful about how lethal you make your world. You may want to allow PCs access to spells such as *revivify* or *close wounds* from the *Miniatures Handbook*. These spells can be cast reactively as immediate actions to snatch a character back from the brink right before she dies. You might also think twice about using the death-by-massive-damage rule and other effects that produce repeated save-or-die situations -- especially at high levels.

But even if you're fine with all the standard magical techniques for raising the dead, campaign realities can make access to them complicated -- especially if the party lacks a high-level cleric. How available should NPC clerics who can cast *raise dead* be -- especially in a world such as **Eberron,** where characters at double-digit levels are supposed to be rare? The situation becomes even more complicated if your players insist on using only *true resurrection* spells (requiring a 17th level caster) because they hate the level loss that comes with *raise dead* and

resurrection. How willing should an NPC cleric be to cast such spells? Does the price and availability change based on whether the PC requesting the spell shares the cleric's faith, alignment, race, or nationality? Do high-level clerics keep scrolls with spells to raise the dead ready for sale at all times? Do PCs have to go back to town to get dead-raising magic, or can they order it "to go"? You should have answers ready for all these questions before the first PC dies in your campaign.

Summary

Death should always be a serious issue, and depending on your campaign, it may or may not end a character's adventuring career. As DM, you must think at some point (preferably at the start of your campaign) about how killing characters fits in with your DMing style and the play style of your group. To what lengths (if any) will you go to prevent needless character death? If preserving the lives of PCs is a high priority, you can drop hints to your players about how to avoid lethal situations and make the best use of their character abilities. Alternatively, you can fudge die rolls, decrease save DCs, and use other behind-the-screen techniques to ensure that characters survive.

If you want some degree of lethality in your game, consider how easy it should be for characters to have companions raised from the dead. If you don't want dead characters returning at all, you might want to let your PCs have access to magic that can snatch a character back from the brink of death, or rethink the use of certain game rules that tend to increase lethality. If you do allow the standard magical techniques for restoring life, decide in advance how accessible NPCs who offer such services should be, and whether such magic can be portable.

In the next installment, we'll talk about how to handle some of the other issues that arise when a character dies.

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, son Allen, and dog Bear. He is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing **D&D** in 1981 and currently runs one weekly campaign while playing intermittently in two others.

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